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Negotiating the “Sins of the Past”: PFAS-Exposures and Reproduction in the Danish Commonwealth

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ABSTRACT

Kalaallit Nunaat, The Faroes, and Denmark have the highest levels of Per- and Polyfluorinated Substances (PFAS)-pollution in the world. However, the ways in which these “forever chemicals” come to matter across the three geographical contexts, connected by a colonial past and present, vary significantly. This article explores how colonial relations become entangled with chemical pollution and endocrine disruption in recent scandals concerning PFAS. We ask: whose reproduction appears to be under threat from PFAS-pollution? And how does the health of Danish Commonwealth babies come to matter differently? Based on an archive of scientific, parliamentary, and popular scientific debates in Kalaallit Nunaat, The Faroes, and Denmark, we discuss how toxicity becomes, in the case of Kalaallit Nunaat and The Faroes, animated through iconic nonhuman animals (such as polar bears and whales) and Kalaallit hunters, while it, in the case of Denmark, emerges as an alarm related to the pollution of white maternal bodies and images of vulnerable white children. The article brings new insights into the ways that toxins create reproductive trouble and emerge in Danish colonial and racialized relations.

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Introduction

In the summer of 2023, the people of Kalaallit Nunaat, The Faroes and Denmark—in this order—were awarded the dubious world record as the most PFAS-polluted populations in the world (Christensen, 2023). Environmental research had revealed remarkably high levels of PFAS-pollution in the blood of people living in the entire Danish Commonwealth, which is the name of metropolitan Denmark and the two autonomous regions—The Faroes and Kalaallit Nunaat—additionally, giving rise to concerns about the health of non-human animals and life-sustaining ecosystems. The further North, the higher levels of pollution were recorded (Christensen, 2023). As one science communication article noted: “The hunter community in Ittoqqortormiit, in the Northeastern parts of Greenland, has some of the world’s highest concentrations of PFAS in their blood, even though they live far away from sources of per- and polyfluoroalkyl-pollution (henceforth PFAS)” (Christensen, 2023, np). This observation underscores what environmental justice scholars and working class, indigenous, and Global South activists have pointed to for decades: That the starkest consequences of environmental degradation are felt by those contributing least to

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pollution and the flows of global capitalism (Åsberg, 2024; Cuomo & Whyte, 2017; DiChiro, 2004, 2010; Gilio-Whitaker, 2019; Nixon, 2011; Pellow, 2016).

As pollution is known to affect people's abilities and wishes to have children, in the face of chemical contamination, reproduction, even understood narrowly as fertility, turns into a "materialist and planetary issue" (Sturgeon, 2010, p. 108). As noted by reproductive justice scholars, reproductive rights should extend beyond the right not to have children to also, include the right to have children and raise them in healthy environments (Ross & Solinger, 2017; Sturgeon, 2010). In this article, we align ourselves with this work and echo Murphy's (2017, p. 496) call to shine "critical light on the ways that settler-colonial capitalism emerges through chemical relations" as well as viewing chemical contamination as forms of "assisted" reproduction embedded within racialized and postcolonial hierarchies. Accordingly, we work from the premise that chemicals can modify, alter, and impair reproductive abilities, and we seek to explore how reproduction becomes entangled with colonial relations and chemicals in recent scandals and scientific queries concerning PFAS in Denmark, Kalaallit Nunaat, and The Faroes.

Briefly, in Danish media, the news of the ubiquitous PFAS-pollution in The Danish Commonwealth inspired widespread reactions. It significantly centred on images of Kalaallit hunters and their hunting prey, potentially with "insane" (Bredsdorff, 2023), "disturbing," even "monstrous," levels of pollution in their blood (Videnskab.dk, 2023) and included calls to think and act on chemical pollution considering Danish colonialism and political power in the Arctic. The Danish politician Valentina Crast (member of the left-wing party Alternativet), for instance, proclaimed in an op-ed that the revelations should "turn on our (Denmark's, ed.) conscience" and that it is a "historical responsibility" for Denmark to handle PFAS-pollution in a way that is attentive towards colonial relations and the autonomy of The Faroes and Greenland" (Crast, 2023, np). Other reactions did not consider these power relations at all, yet similarly framed handling pollution as a way of coming to terms with the past. The medical consultant Kurt Rasmussen (2023, p. 1) for instance stated in a paper to the health committee, in the Danish parliament, that the "PFAS-case is especially about the sins of the past," as the most harmful PFAS-pollutants such as Persistent Organic Pollutants (POPs) were phased out decades ago, but are still to be found in our environment and bodies. Consequently, in both cases, past "sins" persist to haunt present times.

PFAS has been used in consumer products as well as by military bases around the world (National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences, 2023). Known as extremely persistent in the environment; today, PFAS can be found in soil, air, and groundwater and is widespread. Whereas PFAS contamination in Denmark most recently has been tied to fire station practice fields; in Kalaallit Nunaat, chemical pollution is related to colonial infrastructures, for instance, waste from the US military presence. US science and military bases in Kalaallit Nunaat were legitimized by Denmark in the very same years that the country, at the request of the UN, began the so-called "decolonization" of Kalaallit Nunaat (Bjørnskov, 2018), and, as such, in 2018, the UN concluded that it was a Danish responsibility to identify and clean up debris, waste, and pollution in Kalaallit Nunaat related to this environmentally harmful deal between Denmark and the United States.

Against this backdrop, in this article, we ask: Whose reproduction appears to be under threat from PFAS-pollution? And secondly, how does the health of Danish Commonwealth babies come to matter differently? To respond to these questions, we begin by briefly outlining our interest in the three countries. We, then, present our theoretical framework, which is based on feminist science and technology studies scholarship theorizing how toxins create reproductive trouble. In our analysis, we unfold three analytical incisions centring what we, based on our empirical archive, refer to as: 1) Contaminated Mothers. Endangered Danish Families and Consumption Practices, 2) Polluted *Traditions*. Arctic Hunters and Nonhuman Others, and finally, 3) Luminescence. Illuminating Pollution. Whereas contaminated maternal bodies and the concern for (white) Danish babies and families appear at the forefront of the Danish empirical material; the archive also reveals a concern related to what can be described as the conservation of traditional ways of life

epitomized in the figure of the Kalaallit hunter and the protection of Arctic nonhuman animal others. In this way, not only PFAS-pollution itself but also the problematizations of PFAS-pollution re-establish colonial hierarchies, locating Kalaallit in the past and in proximity to already endangered, “wild” nature, while white Danish mothers become bearers of the future through concerns for their yet unborn children. Similarly, indigenous cultural practices, such as hunting and eating larger sea mammals, are rendered toxic, while policy is directed at securing “PFAS-pure” consumer products, contributing to further marginalizing indigenous (ways of) life (A. L. Hauptmann, 2024).

Background. Colonial and Chemical Pasts and Presents

In 2020, the Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen delivered an apology on behalf of the Danish state to the living six (out of 22) Kalaallit so-called “experiment children” by letter. In 1951, the 22 children (ages 4 and 9) were sent to Denmark to be educated and trained to later become part of a so-called Danish-speaking elite in Kalaallit Nunaat (Hansen, 2022). In the short, written apology, Frederiksen acknowledged how the Danish State had violated their fundamental human rights by removing and alienating them from their families, homes, communities, language, and cultural practices as part of an “experiment” aimed at producing model citizens for a “modernized”, “Danish-ized” Kalaallit Nunaat as well as prove the intimate relations between Denmark and Kalaallit Nunaat to the UN.

While Frederiksen rhetorically placed colonial injustices firmly in the past—as something shocking, we did not know of until now—feminist scholars within the North have challenged this conception. Bang & Kroløkke (2023) have for instance highlighted a crucial public debate about the unequal distribution of hormonal birth control injections across “post-mother country” and “post-colony” in the 1980s and 1990s, showing how colonial reproductive injustices were openly challenged, defended—and, then, silenced. Similarly, Dyrendom Graugaard et al. (2025) in this issue point out how the Danish IUD-program, rather than a secret only recently revealed, a celebrated national strategy to limit the population growth in Kalaallit Nunaat. Indeed, as Jensen (2016) has pointed out, Denmark is still in a colonial relation to Kalaallit Nunaat, yet the “colonial moment” continues to be seen either as “a phase we have always already passed through or as a moment we have always already lost” ((Jensen, 2016, p. 449)). As such, following the work of Shotwell (2016, p. 23), un-forgetting and “remembering for the future” (2016, p. 49) can itself be an act of “reckoning with an unjust past.”

Kalaallit Nunaat, The Faroes, and Denmark are three geographically separate but historically intertwined nations, presently held together through the imperial construct of The Danish Commonwealth. Though Kalaallit Nunaat’s official colonial status ceased in 1953, when Kalaallit Nunaat became a Danish County, home rule was only acquired in 1979 and further autonomy, including self-determination, in 2009. The Faroes were incorporated into the Danish Kingdom in 1816, with the status of a Danish County, and given home rule in 1948. In both countries, Denmark continues to maintain power of foreign affairs, defence and security policy, currency and monetary policy, and the Supreme Court. The Faroes has approximately 55,000 citizens, its own parliament as well as two seats in the Danish parliament (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Denmark, 2023). Similarly, although much bigger in geographical size, Kalaallit Nunaat has approximately 56,000 citizens, and two seats in the Danish Parliament. Kalaallit Nunaat and The Faroes have their own distinct languages—Føroyskt and Kalaallisut. In the case of The Faroes, Danish is the official second language. In Kalaallit Nunaat, Danish has been spoken until quite recently by, as already noted, the political and administrative elite. While Kalaallit Nunaat was home to an indigenous population before colonialization, and still is, the Faroese people are generally of Danish/Norwegian descent with no known indigenous population prior to the arrival of The Norsemen in the 9th–10th century (Adler-Nissen, 2024). In accordance, the people of Kalaallit Nunaat have been—and still are—treated as Denmark’s racialized Others (Loftsdóttir & Jensen, 2012), while in Adler-Nissen’s analysis of Danish–Faroese relations, Faroese are portrayed as, often awkwardly, “familiar” with

Denmark positioning itself “as a maternalistic colonial power acting on behalf of an adolescent colony that is unable to stand up for itself” (Adler-Nissen, 2024, p. 73)

Being the only country in the Nordic region with long-term, overseas colonies, Denmark’s colonial history is vastly different from other Nordic countries, even though these countries may appear to have many shared characteristics (Jensen, 2016). Denmark’s significant geopolitical and economical gains from colonialism in The Arctic, combined with a (self-)image as a pioneering green nation (yet, simultaneously being the homeland to some of the world’s most successful pharmaceutical- and chemical companies, such as Lundbeck, Novo Nordisk, and Cheminova), Denmark is, we contend, a particularly interesting, yet often overlooked, site to investigate chemical-colonial relations, past and present. Addressing the ways that contamination and colonialism historically come together, Liboiron (2021, p. 15–16) argues that pollution is best understood as engaging “interlocking logics” that enable “colonialism to produce and reproduce its effects.” Contradicting the Danish self-understanding as a green nation, then, this analytic turn towards chemicals entails an understanding of contamination as not merely a form of environmental damage but rather, as embedded within Danish colonial histories and racial hierarchies (Ford, 2020; Liboiron, 2021, p. 6–7).

We take our empirical point of departure in different cases unfolding between 2021 and 2023. This period was chosen in part because of the firefighting foam scandal that appeared in Denmark in 2021 but also to gain access to the ways that PFAS, in contemporary Commonwealth Denmark, has been debated. Briefly, the Danish case involves an environmental firefighting foam scandal that took place in the small coastal city of Korsør located 120 km west of the capital city Copenhagen. Here, 187 members of a local organic farm-to-table organization learned that they had eaten meat contaminated with Perfluorooctane Sulfonate (PFOS). A human- and industrial-made substance, PFOS is part of the larger group of chemicals referred to as PFAS. Of the 187 individuals, 118 tested positive for PFOS-contamination (Alvang, 2021). Banned in Denmark in 2011, firefighting foam with PFOS had, prior to this date, been used on a practice field located adjacent to the organic cattle farm. The case was widely discussed across media brands, in newspapers, televised news reports, and in the Danish parliament and gave rise to the publication of a line of stories seeking to represent the experiences of PFOS-contaminated citizens.

Meanwhile, in the case of Kalaallit Nunaat and The Faroes, chemical contamination in the material gets traced to atmospheric and ocean currents and linked to military air force bases. In Kalaallit Nunaat, Northern hunter communities, polar bears and larger sea animals became contaminated figure heads of PFAS-pollution, while in The Faroes’ small empirical material, chemical contamination appeared widespread and, at various times, entangled with other concerns related to climate change. In combination, and echoing Murphy (2017, p. 495), chemical contamination has “joined the molecular fabric of” the Danish Commonwealth.

Empirically, our archive consists of newspaper articles, scientific reports, parliamentary debates, and televised news reports written from, almost exclusively, Danish perspectives (Danish media outlets, journalists, experts, and cited sources). The digital database Infomedia (n.d.) was used to access Danish newspaper articles (leading to a total of 99 articles for the period between 2021 and 2023). While we read all news articles including the ones following the first contamination scandal in Denmark in 2021, we chose to centre the 2021 Korsør scandal leading to a total of 24 newspaper articles along with 27 short (1–5 minute) televised presentations (primarily from regional television). Meanwhile, in the case of Kalaallit Nunaat, we searched for articles in the digital database Timarit (n.d.) and visited the Polar Library, located in Copenhagen, where we searched in the two Kalaallit newspapers Sermitsiaq and Atuagagdliutit (Grønlandsposten). We also included relevant material from KNR (Kalaallit Nunaat radio reports, available online) along with articles from The Faroes newspaper Dagur (available online).

Notably, though both Kalaallit Nunaat and The Faroes ranged higher on the list of PFAS-polluted populations than Denmark, our archives from these geographical contexts are comparatively small, including only 8 Sermitsiaq articles, 10 KNR (Greenlandic radio reports), and 2 Dagur.

fo articles. This speaks to what Nixon (2011) has elicited with his concept of slow violence: that violence happening gradually and slowly, as, for instance, the continuous, northbound flows of persistent pollutants harming Arctic inhabitants and ecosystems, is often overshadowed by singular, spectacular cases, as the specific Danish case of severe pollution from firefighting foam under study here. In total, our Danish, Kalaallit, and Faroes archive consists of 44 articles, 27 short (1–5 minutes) televised presentations, 2 proposals presented in the Danish parliament on the banning of PFAS consumer products (presented in 2022 and 2023), 1 podcast, and 3 scientific reports significantly shaping the mainstream media conversation.

Bringing “The Chemical Turn” to the Nordics: Theorizing Chemical-Colonial Relations and Reproduction

In tracing how Kalaallit Nunaat, The Faroes, and Denmark are connected not only by a colonial past and present but also by chemical flows, we align ourselves with the work of feminist scholars theorizing how toxic substances as well as toxic imaginaries circulate across bodies and borders (Ah-King & Hayward, 2014; Alaimo, 2010; Bang and Kroløkke, 2023; Cielemecka and Åsberg, 2019; DiChiro, 2010; Ford, 2020; Kirksey, 2020; Lamoreaux, 2023; Murphy, 2017; Roberts, 2007). This includes the ways that chemicals come to matter metaphorically as well as take on material qualities in our three different geographical contexts. In what follows, we turn to feminist scholarship that shapes what has been called “the chemical turn” (Liboiron et al., 2018) and view chemicals, as already noted, as “assisting” reproduction (Murphy, 2013, p. 3).

Chemical contamination and reproduction connect in different ways. Murphy (2006, 2013) addresses this in their development of the concept of *chemical regimes of living*. Chemicals assist reproduction when, for example, causing reproductive harm either in the body—or by extension—the fetus (Murphy, 2013, p. 3). Moreover, chemicals (such as in hormonal birth control) regulate individual fertility but are also instrumentalized to regulate populations, as a means of maintaining power hierarchies of race, ability, class, and gender (Bang and Kroløkke, 2023; Briggs, 2002; Callaci, 2018; Roberts, 1997; Ross & Solinger, 2017; Sasser, 2019). As Sasser (2019) has shown, populationist rhetorics have significantly resurfaced with the intensification of the climate crisis, prompting feminist scholars to carefully consider the intersection between race, reproduction, and toxic exposures.

Chemicals also regulate, disrupt, and become reproductive agents in human as well as nonhuman animal lives in distinctly gendered ways (Bang & Kroløkke, 2023; Cohen et al., 2023; Roberts, 1997). In the case of men, for example, chemical contamination is perceived as adversely affecting men’s reproductive lives including their ability to become fathers—even to become men (Kroløkke et al., 2024). This extends to cis-gendered men’s reproductive lives, when chemicals are seen to lower testosterone levels and “endanger” men’s sperm quality including gendered concerns related to masculinity and so-called reproductive fitness (Kroløkke, 2020; Tarapore & Ouyang, 2018). For example, Kroløkke (2020, p. 181) shows how the Fertility-Tech and the Big Sperm industry build upon the fear of diminished male reproductive fitness revamped, in the case of Danish men, into a “form of hegemonic masculinity” in which men must be pro-active and “risk-manage their reproductive futures.”

Accordingly, and as echoed in Liboiron et al.’s (2018, p. 336), chemicals impact how life develops from “the scale of cells to cultures” to “broader power systems” at the level of individual—in this case—reproductive bodies. Similarly, addressing these broader structural inequalities, Shadaan and Murphy (2020, p. 7) argue that pollutants can be viewed as “the structural and extensive reach of settler colonialism and racial capitalism.” Murphy (2013) echoes this in the development of the term *distributed reproduction* which, when tied to the reproductive justice movement, situates chemical contamination and reproductive abilities within larger critical and structural questions. Jointly, then, feminist scholarship expands the scope of critical cultural analysis of chemical contamination to go beyond isolated instances of bodily harm to include conceptualizations of the reproductive

body as always already contaminated but in structurally uneven ways and with unequal consequences.

Taken together, in this article, the chemical turn entails paying attention to how contamination and reproduction emerge and are constructed within colonial and chemical histories and trajectories. Clearly, colonial and chemical histories are geographically widespread, yet, frequently, also, silenced (Mukherjee, 2016). In our analysis, we highlight the ways that pollution comes to matter in and through language and visuals. This means analysing how chemical contamination becomes animated noting, whenever possible, the ways that language works to constitute understandings of chemical contamination, colonialism, and reproduction. In this manner, we show how chemicals occupy positions between “the ‘natural’ and ‘cultural’ worlds” (Roberts & Langston, 2008, p. 629). We begin our analysis by centring the first analytical incision on imaginaries involving contaminated mothers and endangered Danish families and consumption practices.

Contaminated Mothers. Endangered Danish Families and Consumption Practices

I wonder how we have created a global situation where mothers in the Arctic worry about poisoning their children through their very life giving breast milk, while mothers in other countries rely on the same chemicals to protect their children from disease. (Watt-Cloutier, 1999, p. 1)

In her now-famous speech to the International Persistent Organic Pollutants (POPs) Elimination Network Forum Inuit, Canadian activist Sheila Watt-Cloutier (1999) called for international attention to the ways that POPs poison the Arctic. Chemicals injure Arctic women and babies, she (Watt-Cloutier, 1999) argued. Whereas Watt-Cloutier, in her capacity as Chair of the Inuit Circumpolar Conference, repeatedly has made environmental toxins part of her agenda; in contemporary Denmark and in our archive, it is the Danish mother who emerges as in danger. For example, in a TV feature of one of the Korsør residents, we watch Cecilie getting her blood test done to check her PFOS-levels (Eriksen, 2021, np). Rolling up her sleeve, with her pregnant belly only slightly showing, Cecilie performs normative understandings of motherhood and asserts that the waiting time is going to be difficult: How is her new baby going to come into this world? If, as she notes, her PFOS-levels are high, then Cecilie (and her partner) must feed the baby formula (Eriksen, 2021). Referring to the fact that she is otherwise “a good breast feeder” (as documented through her previous two pregnancies), her breastmilk may be, she says, “too poisonous for my child to drink” (Eriksen, 2021, np). In her story, Cecilie’s potentially contaminated body troubles the Danish archetypical mother figure including naturalized as well as state-condoned conceptions of a “pure,” “safe,” nutritious maternal environment (Carroll & Kroløkke, Accepted/in press).

In these debates, the white maternal breast emerges as especially vulnerable to PFAS-contamination (Albæk & Vibjerg, 2021). Women with high PFAS-levels may experience trouble breastfeeding, while very high values mean that breastfeeding is not recommended at all—and this even though breastfeeding is also described as a “truly effective de-poisoning of the mother” (Albæk & Vibjerg, 2021, p. 4). Akin to endocrine disrupting chemicals that are seen to disable sperm in its naturalized reproductive drive to fertilize the female oocyte (Kroløkke et al., 2024); breastmilk is viewed as having a potentially crippling effect, high-jacking white Danish women’s abilities to perform normative forms of good motherhood.

Reiterating the ways that PFOS has contaminated and entered the fabric of the pregnant body, we later learn that Cecilie’s daughter Sophia was born with high PFOS-values in her body. The narrative uncovers how Cecilie clearly is not a “fortress, separable from the world and requiring defense against the world” (Shotwell, 2016, p. 11): baby Sophia has been hospitalized twice and her mother is convinced that PFOS has weakened Sophia’s immune defence system. Similarly, Cecilie’s two-year-old daughter, Olivia, appears to have a suppressed immune system. As echoed in a journalistic description of Cecilie (Karkov, 2021, p. 14), the PFOS poison and the tragedy run in her “veins and her thoughts. It is the premise for the fight that she daily fights for her two

daughters: Two-year old Olivia is always sick and Sophia, who is ten weeks old, has already been hospitalized twice.” Naming the children and documenting them through photos, while positioning white-skinned, blonde Cecilie within normative ideologies as a vigilant protector of her children, helps re-situate this young mother within conventional understandings of good motherhood. Chemicals are seen to wreak havoc with these white feminized Danish bodies and in the visual imageries, mother and child physical and emotional ties are cemented and naturalized.

Not only is chemical contamination seen to threaten women’s maternal fitness (i.e. their abilities to enact “good” motherhood), but contamination potentially, also, hijacks the make-up of the Danish family. For example, in the Danish parliamentary debates, Søren Egge Rasmussen, spokesperson and member of the Danish left-wing party Enhedslisten, calls for PFAS to get thrown out of the home, providing an illustrative example of the “not in my backyard”-approach to chemicals that Shotwell has called “defensive individualism” (Shotwell, 2016, p. 11). As noted by Rasmussen: “It is a question of getting PFAS out of the bathroom. It is a question of getting PFAS out of the kitchen, so it is not in the frying pans. It is a question of getting PFAS out of the kindergartens, so that children are not running around in rain clothes full of PFAS” (Rasmussen, B25, 12:21). Viewing PFOS contamination as especially poisonous to children, Rasmussen further notes: “Sometimes children are more receptive to chemicals because of their skin, and because they have a body which is not done developing. We must take caution as far as children are concerned” (Rasmussen B25, 13:31). The visual material echoes this concern as well. Here, Danish, white-skinned children appear barefoot outside, kneeling to touch and play with the potentially toxic soil (Vibjerg & Albæk, 2021, p. 6). They sit on swings surrounded by a Danish lush green summer landscape (Mengel, 2021, p. 26) or on the lap of a smiling white mother (Karkov, 2021, p. 14).

In these examples, PFAS-pollution introduces dissonance to scenes of otherwise balanced and harmonious Danish family life; it functions to prompt an unsettling re-reading of familiar figures and landscapes—the mother, the home, the children playing outdoors—in the light of toxic presence. This affective state has been described by Reinert (2019) as “retroactive shock” and characterized as a significant dimension of the experience of living in the Anthropocene: “the point where you discover yourself ‘already wounded,’ awakening to an invisible yet constitutive injury that had already been inflicted, a long time ago, which you carried without knowing but now that you know, it changes everything.” In the Danish cases, persistent chemicals catalyse shocking and scandalous realizations that “normal” and “good” Danish lifestyle choices are fundamentally polluted and have been so for a long time (Shotwell, 2016) and political calls to action are guided actively towards cleaning consumer products (“frying pan,” “rain gear”) and social spaces considered important for health in a Danish context (“kitchen,” “kindergarten”).

Paraphrasing Mol’s (2021) work, Åsberg (2024, p. 11) links eating to cultural sites as well as the politics of the land and more-than-human environments. A 2023 Danish case of PFAS-contaminated organic chicken eggs echoes this as well. This case triggered widespread affectively charged responses. One news article for instance proclaimed: “It creates a sense of disillusion when even organic eggs are damaging” (Friis, 2023, p. 4). In another article, the cover image portrayed the toxic eggs in the context of a traditional Danish meal—on buttered rye bread with coffee on the side, served on light blue porcelain—somewhat resembling a well-known Danish Bing and Grøndal design (Fogde, 2023, p. 6). Again, the illusion of healthy, pure Danish living, Danish design, and food consumption (Shotwell, 2016) is momentarily challenged by the realization that persistent of chemicals are part of us, our present and our past—as further stated in the article: “They (PFAS) are in the ocean and the soil. In pans, clothes, and furniture. They are in the blood of all of us. And that is unfortunately how it has been for decades” (Friis, 2023, p. 4). Similarly, in the Korsør case, Mie Rasmussen expresses her concern when speaking of having eaten and fed the family contaminated red meat (for years). PFOS-values up to 176 times the recommended values are, in the material, contrasted to the Rasmussen family’s desire to feed the two children (aged nine and six) healthy and organic meat, interestingly, also, derived from what has the appearance of Danish happy and free-ranging cows.

This section has shown how chemical contamination disrupts and troubles conventional Danish understandings of women's maternal fitness as well as naturalized ways of doing Danish family life. The visual images centre particular Danish families reiterating a concern related to what appears to be white, heterosexual, and primarily middle-class families' (reproductive) health and its relation to consumption. While feminist scholars note that the pre-toxic body does not exist (DiChiro, 2010; Shotwell, 2016), this section reveals how the realization of the decade-long reliance on persistent toxic chemicals in Danish everyday life challenges views of pure Danish mothers and lifestyles, reconnecting these with a polluting and polluted past and present.

Polluted Traditions. Arctic Hunters and Nonhuman Others

Whereas reproduction and family life combined with maternal health are foregrounded in relation to Danish cases of PFAS-pollution; in the Kalaallit Nunaat and The Faroes material, what gets framed as the Arctic "traditions" and the "Arctic soul" emerge metaphorically as well as materially as already at risk. PFAS contamination disrupts not only the physical health of Kalaallit populations; PFAS ruins, we are told, Kalaallit traditional ways of life. Accordingly, in this narrative, tradition emerges rhetorically as well as visually as embodying Kalaallit physical and emotional health, yet it is simultaneously, as Graugaard (2020, p. 85) convincingly points out, a colonial and racialized strategy that locates Kalaallit and Faroese populations in the past. This colonial strategy works, Knoblock (2024, p. 147) argues, by positioning tradition with notions of being "less developed," and thus, cementing a relationship of inferiority.

In our archive, iconic nonhuman animals such as polar bears, whales, and seals appear metaphorically and materially as symbols of a disrupted (sick) Arctic. This crucially actualizes the question of food sovereignty in the context of Danish colonialism, which pollution makes increasingly difficult to obtain. In the face of pollution, Hauptmann notes, indigenous food—which is already in Kalaallit Nunaat positioned as abnormal and unhealthy in relation to Danish imported food products is further toxified, necessitating strengthened reliance on imported foods and marginalization of indigenous cultural practices (A. L. Hauptmann, 2024). Similarly, in the material, maintaining an Arctic diet is positioned as key to Kalaallit physical and emotional well-being, yet doing so also becomes increasingly problematic with persistent pollutants accumulating in larger sea mammals. One news account states: "PFAS is not only a threat to physical health. It is also a threat to psychological health. Greenlandic foods are important for us to feel good in the soul," regional doctor and researcher Gert Mulvad states (Kristiansen, 2023, np). Reflecting upon eating Danish food, Kalaallit hunter Åge Danielsen similarly reportedly states: "I get this feeling of hunger and unease. I quickly get tired of Danish food, and my appetite drops dramatically" and proclaims that he is going to continue to eat his catch despite its apparent toxicity (Kristiansen, 2023, np). As Kalaallit ways of life are threatened through pollution of ecosystems and simultaneous import and promotion of "Danish food."

Meanwhile, situating contamination in marine animals as "rampant," for example, Danish researchers point to PFOS results in 13 out of 16 recent tests carried out in polar bear, whale, and seal populations (Albæk, 2021). In the case of the polar bear, vulnerability appears double-edged: Endangerment due to climate change as well as, in the case of PFAS, chemical pollution. Accompanying a news article, a polar bear is visually depicted dead, laying on white ice, while a masculinized hunter skins it: Laying naked on the ice, the polar bear emerges as an icon of Kalaallit traditions as well as endangered and toxic to the humans who rely upon its meat (Veirum, 2023, np). Nonhuman animals (polar bears, and seals), hunters, rocky and icy landscapes, and the characteristic colourful wooden houses visually replace, in the case of Kalaallit Nunaat, the white skinned, blond-haired children and green meadows characteristic of the Danish media material. Meanwhile, in The Faroes material, a snowy and rocky landscape appears alongside an hourglass stressing the inability to escape PFAS-pollution as well as the notion that time is running out

(Samuelsen, 2023, np). Accordingly, nonhuman others and more than human ecologies (such as the Arctic landscape and the polar bear) appear as having already been contaminated.

While PFAS gets connected to cancer and endocrine disruption including weakened immune systems; interestingly, in the Kalaallit and The Faroes archive, little attention is placed on the effects of PFAS in children, reproductive systems, and with it, reduced fertility. This even though an increase in infertility in Kalaallit Nunaat and the use of assisted reproductive technologies (carried out in Denmark) have been debated in the parliament and in Kalaallit media (Hviid & Kilime, 2023, np).

As evidenced in this section, unique to the Kalaallit and The Faroes archives are the ways in which chemical contamination follows in the footsteps of previous colonial and chemical interventions. Pollution includes, but is not limited to, Danish modernization and commercial interests, the threat to Inuit hunting traditions, and a more general concern related to the effects of climate change. Completely absent from these debates are the ways that chemicals contaminate reproductive human and nonhuman reproductive animal lives. For example, the Kalaallit mother is, as otherwise mentioned in Watt-Cloutier's (1999) activism, nowhere present. Instead, what has the appearance as "traditions" are, as Graugaard (2020) shows, also embedded within colonial and commercial interests (seal hunting exported and used for blubber, for example). Having identified different ways in which chemical contamination becomes strategically embedded within notions of traditional Inuit life, we turn now to a discussion of the ways that Danish Commonwealth natural and cultural heritage additionally emerge as threatened by contamination.

Luminescence. Illuminating Pollution

Imagine a world without the super poisonous forever chemicals PFAS.

Imagine a world where your rain clothes become perhaps bit less water repellant. Imagine a world where your plant-based burger does not slip the pan quite as easily. Imagine a world, where sun lotion perhaps gets a bit more difficult to put on.

This is, however, a world without poisonous, damaging, and potentially cancer-causing substances in our children's clothes, in our food, and in our dental flush, and it is a world that I would rather live in.

It may be a bit more of a hassle, but I would rather handle a little hassle than walking around becoming luminescent with deadly forever chemicals. (Gejl, 2023, B25: 14:20)

Repeatedly using the word "imagine," Torsten Gejl, from the Danish left-wing party Alternativet, in a speech, asks his fellow Danish parliamentarians to consider a world without PFAS-contamination. In this section, we problematize the articulation of an affective longing for Danish "pure" natural and cultural heritage and point to the ways that chemical contamination become animated as threatening human and nonhuman animal forms of kinship. As reckoned by feminist scholars, humans are inescapably entangled in more-than-human networks and environments (Åsberg, 2024; DiChiro, 2010; Murphy, 2017). Consequently, while we share Gejl's (2023) desire for a less chemically contaminated world, we nevertheless want to entertain the critical potential that luminescence, as articulated in the above quote, holds.

In the case of the Danish material, imagining a chemical-free world appears alongside narratives of chemical contamination that metaphorically as well as materially "invade" the "innocence" of the country. Consequently, while luminescence—as a metaphor—holds the potential of making dangerous chemicals visible; luminescence rhetorically, also, reinstates and cements the importance of Danish heritage. For example, the spokesperson of the right-wing party, Nye Borgerlige, in the parliamentary debates, argues in a tellingly anthropocentric statement:

We are occupied with taking care of nature, the environment, and the health of Danes. The Danish nature and environment, we are surrounded with, gives us value in life. Nature is part of us, of our history and our cultural

heritage. We have a responsibility to provide our descendants without destroying nature while it is in our care. (Vermund, 2023, B25: 14:23)

Similarly, the, then, minister of the environment Lea Wermelin (Samråd (2021, 14:29) speaks to a form of Danish environmental nationalism, when she notes: “We have a need to protect Danes but also our environment in Denmark as best as possible.” Moreover, and exemplifying the uniqueness of Danish coastal towns and their natural beauty, Mette Abildgaard, parliamentary member of the conservative party, notes: “Every summer my family and I visit the charming coastal city Henne Strand in the southwestern parts of Jutland” (Abildgaard, 2023, B25: 14:05). Whereas the Western Jutland location, of Henne Strand, gets portrayed in an idyllic tone, Abildgaard comments on the PFAS value that some of the water inlets reportedly have, thereby, turning what used to be a safe, child-friendly family vacation into a health hazard. As noted by her: “I do not think anyone wants to take any chances on behalf of their children” (Abildgaard, 2023, B25: 14:05). In this construction, Danish natural heritage (Henne Strand and its inlets) appears endangered and, in the context of pollution, also, endangered.

In both sets of material, PFAS gets positioned as disrupting human and nonhuman animal forms of kinship. Whereas Kalaallit human and nonhuman animal relations become stipulated within colonized (past) notions of Inuit traditions (Graugaard, 2020), in the Danish empirical material, animal husbandry and meat consumption entangle in ways that reiterate romanticized slow-living on the Danish country side. For example, and in reference to the desire to partake in the organic cow association, Cecilie notes: “We bought our own cow, and it is organic and delicious, and we have even given it apples” (<https://www.tv2east.dk/pfos-i-korsoer/hoejgravide-cecilie-testet-for-pfos-det-er-knald-eller-fald>). Similarly, the head of the Korsør cow association recollects how his children, in the spring, would engage in kinship-making practices by naming each calf: “Every other week the family went by to see them (the calves)” (Astrup, 2023, p. 8; Kroløkke et al., 2024). Recollecting how the calves grazed on organic fields, being fed with apples, Kenneth Nielsen, in this news article, narrates eating the cattle “with good conscience” (Astrup, 2023, p. 8). While situated within a clear human-cow hierarchy in which cows are fed to later become nutritious organic food becomes equated with having a good conscience; Cecilie, and along with her other members of the Korsør cow association, highlights the ways that awareness and caretaking of nonhuman animals help produce moral food consumption practices.

The chemical regime of living (Murphy, 2013) gets, in our archive, connected to nationalized forms of belonging. In the case of Kalaallit Nunaat, Naalakkersuisut (the Kalaallit Nunaat Government) echoes a desire to work “continually to develop and improve conditions for handling PFAS-pollution in Kalaallit Nunaat and protecting the population and the vulnerable Arctic environment” (Lindstrøm, 2023, np). Contamination resides, as echoed in one recent scientific report, within the snow and ice of the cryosphere turning them into “reservoirs of toxic chemicals” (A. Hauptmann et al., 2017, p. 1). Similarly, albeit in this case involving numerous photos of Danish green fields; in the archive, the chemically contaminated fields are described in romanticized terms when noting that: “On a field in Korsør, a group of cows are walking around eating grass. The grass is green, and the cows are satisfied” (Astrup, 2023, p. 8). Pictures of Danish landscapes evoke, in the material, a nostalgic longing for past purity and innocence—what environmental humanities scholars have referred to as solastalgia, capturing the sense of “feeling homesick without leaving home” (Albrecht, 2006, p. 34).

Whereas contamination, in the archive at large, appears widespread; it also emerges as coming mostly from “the outside” of national borders contributing to understandings of a threat to Danish Commonwealth natural and cultural heritage. This despite the Korsør case highlights the ways that contamination, also, appears within Denmark, for example. In contrast, PFAS-contamination, in the Danish news, is described as “raining from the sky. They can be found in cows’ meat and fish, in ocean foam, and in a small number of drinking water drillings, and in several properties” (Bonde & Østergaard, 2023, p. 19). In the case of the Arctic, contamination gets situated in proximity to geographical location and ocean currents as well as in connection with cold temperatures that

enable toxins to be locked in place (A. Hauptmann et al., 2017, p. 8). It is in this context that Kalaallit residents are both held in place in a colonial narrative of tradition as well as racialized when placed, as articulated by Graugaard (2020, p. 78), in a “sphere of nature.”

In contrast to the above narratives, centring on the possibility of (national) purity, the metaphor of luminescence, we suggest, might be more fitting for describing how chemicals work in relation to reproduction and reproduction of colonial hierarchies in the context of the Danish Commonwealth. Rather than something which can be displaced outside national borders, chemicals in themselves—our study has shown—illuminates the tracks, flows, and relations established by colonialism and industrial capitalism. As such, while Nixon (2011) with the concept of slow violence has pointed to the problem of pollution and its effects being—form a particular privileged point of view—hard to grasp, even somewhat invisible, and therefore challenging to mobilize action around, luminescence suggests that chemicals, their effects, and their colonial relations are not just clearly perceivable; they are self-illuminating. As Lundsteen (2024, p. 281) shows, chemical “submergence” – “hiding” pollution by “normalizing and externalizing” it indeed includes re-emergence: Clearly, forever chemicals have their way of showing up. Luminescence, then, serves to reimagine the ways that chemical contamination engages different forms of visibility—making chemical bodies visible as well as—when humans like jelly fish or fireflies glow in the dark—deconstructing human and nonhuman animal categories. Luminescence proposes an imaginary of forever chemicals as, rather than imperceptible, visible and visibilizing—even in the darkness of chemical and colonial “non-memory” (Blaagaard & Andreassen, 2012, p. 85). As reckoned in Åsberg’s (2024, p. 7) work: “Perhaps there never were any pure nature or pristinely human culture to divide into cultural and natural disciplines.” Contrary to Gejl’s (2023) intent, then, the ability to glow “in itself” may rhetorically as well as visually assist us in eliciting colonial and racialized nature-culture divisions. These are divisions that historically have placed colonial subjects in proximity to nature and placed Danes in the “sphere of civilization” (Graugaard, 2020, p. 78). While Gejl, in the introductory quote, poignantly criticizes the ways that consumption and convenience entangle with chemical contamination, we have argued that luminescence can help re-imagine how chemical contamination, commercial interests, and reproductive human and nonhuman animal lives past and present come to matter and matter differently.

Conclusion. Persistent Colonial-Chemical Relations and Reproduction in the Danish Commonwealth

Troubling colonialism as it continues to unfold in present times, in this article, we have shown how persistent pollution and reproduction emerge as a challenge to forgetting the colonial relations we are still intimately embedded within. The debates, not always intentionally, highlight racialized and colonial relations in which bodies come to matter differently in the light of toxic exposure. Our research shows how the reproductive body is contaminated and gains visibility in structurally uneven ways. Contamination illuminates, even makes luminescent, the colonial infrastructures as well as the ecologies on which our lives and lifestyles critically depend.

Chemical contamination crosses, as feminist environmental justice scholars and activists show, multiple boundaries. Contaminated human and nonhuman animal bodies challenge preconceived notions of self-containment and purity. Taking this premise that there is “no purity to claim” (Åsberg, 2024, p. 11) to heart, our analysis reveals how Danish white mothers, babies, natural and cultural heritage along with consumption practices become rendered as that which must be protected. In contrast, Kalaallit hunters’ bodies are embedded within record-breaking PFAS values and already polluted human and nonhuman animal ecologies (climate change, smoking, food chains, for example). Interestingly, the ways that chemical contamination wreaks havoc with Kalaallit reproductive bodies are, although scientifically known, silenced. As a result, in the face of pollution and within the Danish Commonwealth, reproductive lives and life forms are distributed and come to matter differently.

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